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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: IMO STATE GOVERNOR TO SWITCH TO PDP ON JULY 25

REF: ABUJA 845
LAGOS 264

¶1. (SBU) Summary: After weeks of speculation and denial, Imo State Governor Ikedi Ohakim of the Progressive Peoples' Alliance (PPA) has now finalized his plan to switch to the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). PPA leaders have threatened to drag him to the Supreme Court if he leaves the party. However, the PDP holds a strong majority in Imo State, and this move should secure Ohakim a re-election in 2011. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On July 21, George Egwu, Governor Ohakim's Special Adviser on security matters told PolSpec that the governor has indeed decided to switch over to the PDP. On July 25, Governor Ikedi Ohakim will formally publicize his defection to the PDP at a ceremony in the Imo State capital of Owerri (Note: Governor Ohakim won the April 14, 2007 election on the ticket of the PPA after he quit the PDP following disputed governorship primaries held on December 11, 2006. End note). President Umaru Yar'Adua will lead ranking PDP members to attend the ceremony and formally accept Ohakim into PDP's fold. (Note: On July 16, Bright Nwelue, Governor Ohakim's Special Adviser on Public Affairs, told PolSpec he was unaware of any ceremony planned for July 25, describing media reports of the event as false. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Prior to Ohakim's planned defection, several groups had pressured him to cross over to the PDP. In April, the PDP-dominated State House of Assembly passed a resolution urging Ohakim to switch over to the PDP. The legislators later visited Ohakim and reportedly pleaded with him to join the PDP. Many traditional rulers and politicians from the Governor's immediate constituency held political rallies to urge Ohakim to cross to the PDP. They argued that he could not secure a second term without the majority party's support. However, Orji Uzo Kalu, former Abia State Governor and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the PPA, has threatened to take Ohakim to the Supreme Court if he leaves his party for the PDP. Orji argued that since Ohakim was elected governor on PPA's ticket, he cannot join another party before the expiration of his tenure.

¶4. (SBU) Imo state is a PDP-dominated state with the usual political power games. Ohakim left the PDP following disputed governorship primaries in December 2006, when Ifeanyi Ararume, the leading PDP candidate during the primaries, instituted a legal action urging the Supreme Court to declare him the rightful winner of the primaries (Note: The PDP had replaced Ararume with another candidate Charles Ugwu without a clear reason. End note.) The Supreme Court ruled in Ararume's favor and declared him the party's candidate for the April 14, 2007, governorship election. Angered by the Supreme Court ruling, the PDP announced it would field no candidate for that election. Instead, the party struck a deal with a rival party candidate, Ohakim (who had by then joined the PPA), and urged its members and supporters to vote for him during the election. Ohakim won the election with PDP's massive support. The PDP currently controls all nine seats in the House of Representatives and the three senatorial seats in the National Assembly. 25 of the 27 State House of Assembly members are PDP.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Ohakim's defection to the PDP is nothing but a mere survival strategy. Overwhelmed by the popularity of the PDP in Imo State and its grassroots support in nearly all the local government areas, Governor Ohakim realized he cannot successfully confront the PDP in the 2011 election. He also knew he stands to benefit from membership of a party that will make every effort to control the federal government after the 2011 election, rather than the much weaker, South East based PPA. End comment.

¶6. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Abuja.

BLAIR